MUSLIMS IN THE SOVIET UNION

Memorandum by the Islamic Council of Europe to the Conference on Security & Cooperation in Europe at Madrid, November 11,1980.

'Genocide' has become an all too familiar accusation in the latter half of the 20th century. Sometimes its use is justified, at others it is no more than a desperate attempt to arouse world opinion on an issue that is not receiving the attention it deserves. Over-use is beginning to debase this most terrible of all terms, but there are, tragically, still cases in which it is appropriate. We believe the plight of the Soviet Muslims to be one such case.

Some less knowledgeable may say that Soviet Muslims are living in peace and relative prosperity, they will say, materially far better off than most of their brothers in neighbouring Muslim countries. This is very much open to question as recent evidence points even to economic deprivation and exploitation. However, the question is not one of physical destruction, but of something far more insidious, far less obvious to the outside observer and, as a result, infinitely more dangerous: it is no less than cultural genocide and it is being directed against all the Muslims under the Soviet Union in a greater or lesser measure.

Who are the Muslims of the USSR ? It is not an easy question to answer briefly, since there are over 50 million of them and they belong to 40 different national groups, ranging from the 60,000 Nogais who live in Transcaucasia to the 12,500,000 Uzbeks who live in Central Asia. There are 6 'Muslim' Union republics (the Azerbaidzhan, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Tadzhik, Turkmen and Uzbek SSRs) and a number of autonomous republics (e.g. the Karakalpak and Tatar ASRs). The Soviet Union, have thus the fourth largest concentration of Muslim populations in the World. It also contains within its borders some of the most famous Islamic centres, e.g. Bukhara and Samarkand.

The Soviet Constitution purports to guarantee every citizen

the right to profess any religion and to perform religious worship (article 52). It also, however, introduces the "right" to conduct atheistic propaganda, while prohibiting the right to reply or even to conduct religious education for children and young people. In effect, this means that there is a constant bombardment of anti-religious propaganda to which no redress is even available.

The number of trained ulema is derisively low: For the Muslims, there are only two medresses (theological colleges), one of which provides the equivalent of secondary school education (though boys can enter only after completing their military service) and the other, higher education. Students are not accepted every year and the total student population of these medresses for the six-year course is about 70 young men each. The essential qualification for entry is a good knowledge of Arabic, something which is extremely difficult to acquire outside the medresse, since there are very few people who now know this language in Central Asia and, religious education being banned, none of the ulema dare take the risk of teaching it.

The number of mosques matches the appallingly small number of imams: there are about 450 for the whole of the 50 million Soviet Muslims; cf the pre-Revolution figure of 25,000 mosques (for a much smaller population)[1]. Religious publications are almost non-existent, copies of the Qur'an are in very short supply. In a attempt to placate Muslims from other countries and to prevent them enquiring too closely about the plight of the Soviet Muslims, a glossy 'religious' quarterly, Muslims of the Soviet East, is published in Arabic, French and English, as well as Uzbek, one of the Muslim languages of the Soviet Union; however, apart from the fact that it is not available to ordinary readers in Uzbekistan (or elsewhere in the USSR), the Uzbek edition is written in Arabic script, a script that has not been used for 50 years, hence, even were it to fall into the hands of an Uzbek,

Note-1. "Official" Islam in the Soviet Union by A. Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, Religion in Communist Lands, VII, 3, 1979. In this article it is stated that there are approximately 143 'working' mosques in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, 200 in European Russia and Siberia, 27 in the Daghestan ASSR, 2 in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, 10 in the northern Caucasus and 16 in Transcaucasia."

he would almost certainly not be able to read it.

It would be possible to catalogue specific injustices in great detail, but the disinterested observer might well say, that, while all these things are highly regrettable, they do not add up to a charge of cultural genocide. All religious groups in the USSR are, after all, persecuted and the Muslims have not fared as badly as some. But there is one major difference between Islam and most other religions: It is not an abstract philosophy, it is a way of life and to deny or to supress this way of life is, for a Muslim, persecution of the worst kind .

To take a few apparently small examples: 1) in the Soviet Union today, the Arabic script - a vehicle of Islamic religious, cultural and educational ideas is banned; 2) pigs are raised on collective farms throughout Central Asia; 3) muslims workers are not given even optional holidays to observe the two major festivals of Eid; 4) they do not have the freedom to travel abroad for religious education and even for the obligatory Haj to Mecca. To a non-Muslim these things may seem insignificant, but to a Muslim they are horrifying, because they strike at the roots of a centuries-old culture, at the very fabric of Muslim life.

The Arabic script has always had a special place in Muslim culture[2], for it represents a tangible link with the revealed Word of God: the Qur'an . Nevertheless, the Arabic script was abolished in the USSR in the 1920's : the art forms that had evolved with it, the whole tradition of scholarships was disrupted overnight. It was only the first step in a series of upheavals: over the 50 years the Muslims suffered many other changes of alphabets and scripts (the Azerbaidzhanis experienced 10 different alphabets in 3 different scripts during this period). The break with the past was traumatic. There are now only a handful of scholars who could, even if they wished, begin to transcribe the great literary heritage of Central Asia, The result is a culturally improverished generation of 'Soviet Muslims', who have no means of learning about their own past. Such is the tenacity of the human spirit that the majority of these people, despite all cultural and religious deprivation, are still proud to consider themselves Muslims. But are we, the outside world,

2. The Arabic script has even been used by Muslims to record Slavonic languages such as Serbo-Croat and Polish.

to watch idly while their past, their rightful heritage, is obliterated ?

Typical of this systematic undermining of Muslim values is the treatment of mosques: to destroy them, to treat them as store-houses or offices would be bad enough, but some of them have actually been turned into anti-Muslim museums (e.g. at the foot of the Shah-i-Zinde in Samarkand), places of entertainment and bars where alcohol is served and dance shows are held[3]. If the Soviet Muslims were immigrants in a foreign state, such behaviour on the part of the authorities would still be reprehensible, but how much worse is it when they are not immigrants, but the indigenous, majority population in their own, allegedly sovereign republics (the sovereignty of the Union republics is laid down in article 76 of the Soviet Constitution).

These attacks on the Islamic way of life (of which only a few examples have been given here) are indicative of the relentless cultural persecution to which all Soviet Muslims are subject. There is, however, a certain safety in numbers: it is not easy to take open action against 12,500,000 Uzbeks, 6,500,000 Kazakhs or 5,500,000 Azerbaidzharis. The situation is very different for the small Muslim peoples, some of whom have been singled out for particular persecution. Such a people are the Crimean Tatars, of whom there are today only about 500,000.

The Crimean Tatars settled on the Crimean Peninsula in the early 15th century. Being of Turkic origin and by religion Muslims, they gave their political allegiance to the Ottoman State. In 1783 their land was annexed by Catherine the Great of Russia, who formally assured them that their civil and religious rights would be protected. There were approximately 7 million Crimean Tatars at that time. Almost immediately, the Russians, despite their promises, embarked on a cruelly repressive policy that caused many of their new subjects to emigrate (mostly to Turkey). After

3. "We too are Muslims....." by I.Gilani, Impact 10-18 September - October,1980, pp 5-6.

the 1917 Revolution, the situation appeared to improve dramatically: the Czarist government was blamed for its harsh, anti-Tatar attitude and generous new assurances were offered by the Soviet government.

The Crimean ASSR was created in 1921. Twenty-three years, later, on 18 May 1944, every single Tatar, including school-children, nursing mothers, war-heroes, invalids, the old and the infirm, were all loaded into cattle trucks and deported from their own autonomous republic,exiled to Siberia and Central Asia for alleged collaboration with the Nazis (a crime for which they were never tried, but of which they were 'cleared ' by a decree passed by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 5 September 1967). During and immediately after this terrible journey, 46.2% of the population died (a total of some 60,500 people)[4]. The majority of the Crimean Tatars now live in Uzbekistan, from where they have been ceaselessly campaigning to be allowed to return to their ancient homeland in the Crimea. After their official 'rehabilitation', tens of thousands of them began to make their way back there, but this the Soviet government was not prepared to allow: the Crimean Tatars were said to have 'taken root' in their places of exile (their previous residence of 500 years in the Crimea apparently counting for nothing beside their 25 odd years of exile) and they were forcibly prevented from returning[5]. Those who succeeded in reaching the Crimea were almost all deported, some many times over, Two Tatars have already committed suicide in protest (the only effective form of protest left to them) at this treatment: Musa Mamut in June and Izzet Memedullayev in November 1978. The situation has been steadily worsening.

4. Minority Rights Group, Report no.6, 3rd edition, p.8

5. Cf a recent article in Soviet Weekly (September 13,1980 p 13 in which the Crimean Tatars are depicted as a happy, flourishing community in Uzbekistan: not a word is mentioned of their unceasing struggle to be allowed to return to their own homeland.

On 15 August 1978 the Council of Ministers of the USSR issued an unpublished Decree no.700, entitled 'Supplementary measures to reinforce the passport regime in the Crimean region' (see appendix 1). As the Chronicle of Current Events, no. 52 (March 1979), states:

> Decree No.700 in practice brings about an extraordinary situation in the Crimea, negating several existing laws. According to Articles 336, 338 of the Civil Code of the RSFSR and the corresponding articles of the Ukrainian SSR Civil Code, citizens can only be evicted by the authorities for 'squatting' in an occupied residence, i.e. occupying a home without the permission of the owner. Such a measure as forcible 'eviction from the region' is not foreseen by the legal system, and banishment can only be authorized by a court as a criminial punishment. Although the decree does not mention Crimean Tatars, its practical enforcement leaves no doubt that it is directed exclusively against Tatars returning to the Crimea.

Academician A. Sakharov appealed to President Leonid Brezhnev and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to rescind this decree, pointing out that it was illegal and unjustified (see Appendix 2). Since Decree no.700 came into effect, the number of deportations of Crimean Tatars from the Crimea has increased greatly: from November 1978 to February 1979 some 60 families were deported, compared with only 20 during the period January-October 1978. At least 15 Crimean Tatar civil rights campaigners have been imprisoned or sentenced to internal exile 1979.

Exile from their homeland is not the only injustice suffered by the Crimean Tatars. After their deportation in 1944, books in Crimean Tatar were publicly burned. The very existence of their language was denied, Soviet sources referring to it as 'Tatar', the term commonly used for a quite separate language, that of the Volga Tatars (any textbook on Turkic philology will clarify the distinction between the two languages). No schools were provided in which the medium of instruction was Crimean Tatar, although the right to education in one's native language is written into the Soviet Constitution (article 45). Even today,

despite the fact that the Crimean Tatars are supposed to have 'taken root' in their places of exile, education is still not provided in their native language. Printed material is also in extremely short supply. In 1940, four years before their deportation, 218 titles were published in Crimean Tatar: in the period 1944-57, nothing at all. Between 1957-76, 114 titles were published in Crimean Tatar, but the print runs were extremely small (approx. 3,000), a minute amount of printed literature for a population of some 500,000. If children are not given the opportunity to study their own language, if books are not available to educate people and train them in the use of their language, how is it to survive as a literary language ? Crimean Tatar is not a new language, with a literature born yesterday: it is an ancient language, possessing a rich, unique heritage, but to survive, the essential requirement for a literary language is that it be written. The oral tradition, passed on from parent to child, is not enough. This is all the more true in the case of a language such as Crimean Tatar which, like that of other Muslim peoples in the Soviet Union, has been subjected to several different alphabets within a short period (the most recent was introduced in 1938) so that the establishing of orthographic norms is a matter of urgent concern.

Attempts to reduce their language to the status of an unwritten dialect are not all the Crimean Tatars have had to endure: their copies of the Qur'an have been burned, mosques demolished and cemetries desecrated. Examples of Crimean Tatar culture disappeared from museums or were re-labelled, ignoring their Crimean Tatar origin. One cannot say that the Crimean Tatars are an extreme case and that after all the religious persecution they have suffered is largely irrelevant in the face of their other tragedies. For the Crimean Tatars two things are of paramount importance: their homeland and their religion. These are the two things that define their concept of themselves and no discussion of their civil, or, on a deeper level, their human rights, can afford to ignore this.

Other Muslim peoples, such as Meskhetians (Georgian Muslims) and Khemshils (Armenian Muslims) are also in exile and have been treated equally unjustly. Yet other Muslim peoples, such as the Balkars (population in 1979: 66,334) and the Karachais (population in 1979:131,974) have no schools in their own language nor mosques to worship in. The Balkars and the Karachais were also deported for alleged collaboration with the Nazis; it is true that they have been more fortunate than the others, in that they have been allowed to return to their native lands, but their culture and their religion are now being systematically eradicated.

Today it is the weak who are being attacked: tomorrow there will be new victims. A people's spiritual and intellectual world is as precious and unique as their very existence. The great English poet, John Donne wrote: Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind. Equally, the death of each language, the death of each culture, diminishes every one of us, for we, too, whatever our colour and our creed, are involved in Mankind. It is for this reason that we appeal to you, the signatories of the Helsinki Agreement, to raise at the Madrid Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe the following demands made by the Islamic Council of Europe, on behalf of the Muslims of Europe:

1. That the Soviet Government be urged to end the persistent and serious violation of the fundamental Human Rights of Muslims in the USSR.

2. That Muslims in the USSR be allowed the right to practice their faith in freedom and without constraints.

3. That the Muslim places of worship and schools be restored to their original use and returned to the Muslim community.

4. That the Muslims in the USSR be allowed freedom of travel to perform the Pilgrimage and to establish cultural, social, educational and commercial ties with the world Muslim community.

5. That the Soviet Government be urged to permit

the Muslims to receive and organise religious and cultural education in their own language, in the original scripts.

6. That the Crimean Tatars be allowed to return to their homeland and to settle therein.

Appendix - 1.

"People who have arrived in the Crimean region in an unofficial manner and live there without passports, or with invalid passports, without a permit or registration, despite administrative penalities for violating passport regulations by a decision of the executive committee of the city, district or town regional soviet of people's deputies SHALL BE BANISHED from the region by organs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs; Citizens who own houses, or let or sublet accommodation, or live in hostels and let others live with them without passports, or with invalid passports, without permits or registration, and who are punished for this twice in one year SHALL BE BANISHED from the Crimean region for 2 years by a decision of the executive committee of the city, district or town regional soviet of people's deputies."

Appendix-II.

"Open Appeal to Brezhnev and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR" in February 1979:

In the Crimea cruel mass actions are being carried out on the basis of a secret decree by the Council of Ministers of USSR, No.700 dated 15 August 1978: Crimean Tatars are being deported;houses that they have bought are torn down or confiscated; their property is confiscated; Crimean Tatars are being persecuted in the courts for residing without residence permits because of the illegal discriminatory policies being practiced by the local authorities. Children and old people are being taken out into the open steppes in severe winter weather without warm clothing. Many Crimean Tatars have been been sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Official notices are displayed announcing that the sale of houses to Crimean Tatars will be punished by deportation from the Crimea. These actions violate the human rights of many people; there is no justification for them.